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# Educating Tomorrow's Men: Perceived School Support, Negative Youth Experiences, and Bravado Attitudes In African American Adolescent Males

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the association between negative youth experiences and bravado attitudes in African American urban males. In addition, an examination of positive factors, such as school social support, was examined to understand potential resilient pathways. Data were collected at two sites, a science and math center ( $n = 68$ ) and an academy for academic achievement ( $n = 58$ ). Using Spencer's PVEST (2006) model as a framework, the study hypothesized that negative youth experiences would have a positive relation with bravado attitudes, but perceptions of school support would lessen this relationship. The Perceived School Support construct consisted of students' perceptions of their teachers and administrators. The results partially confirmed the hypothesis. The results also highlight the importance of adolescent perceptions of support in the school context and how this perceived support may decrease bravado attitudes. Further explanation of study's results, future research opportunities, and policy implications are explored.

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change, principals, students, teachers

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1913

Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1913) poem, "We wear the mask" is fitting when depicting the plight of many urban adolescent African American males. Dunbar's symbol of a mask denotes the protective cover used by many urban males to hide the vulnerabilities associated with growing up in stressful contexts. Anecdotal facts and empirical research highlight that many African American adolescent males face tough challenges (Gibbs, 1988; Noguera, 2003). Many must couple normative developmental tasks (i.e., identity development) with contextual experiences of racism and discrimination, economic deprivation, and living in high-risk environments (Cunningham, 1993, 1999; Cunningham, Swanson, Spencer & Dupree, 2003; Erikson, 1968; Ford & Harris, 1996; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Harris, 1995; Spencer, 2006; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Often the characteristics of these environments entail a mixture of family dynamics (i.e., single parent households, extended kin), lack of positive neighborhood facilities, increased crime, negative police presence, inadequate schooling structures, and low availability of positive socializing agents (Fine et al., 2003; Harris, 1995; McLoyd, 1998; Stevenson, 1997). These factors represent the structural constraints that may challenge successful pathways.

Coupled with the previously mentioned factors, African American males are arguably the most stereotyped and stigmatized group. Examples of these stereotypes range from unintelligent to super-athlete to gangster (Cunningham, 1993, 1999; Cunningham et al., 2003; Davis, 2003; Swanson et al., 2003). Because of these stereotypes, urban males may face a myriad of negative experiences outside of their familial spaces, such as harassment from police, individuals in the community, and school officials (Cunningham & Spencer, 1996; Cunningham et al., 2003; Fine et al., 2003). Stereotypes and structural constraints (i.e., denial of access to necessary resources and employment) place urban males at risk for the development of negative attitudes and behaviors. Stevenson, Reed, Bodison, and Bishop (1997) suggest that adolescents experience and act on the world by internalizing messages that affirm or thwart positive development. Research reveals urban African American males who have

negative personal experiences may use externalizing mechanisms, such as the adoption of behaviors and attitudes to thwart feelings of vulnerability and insecurity associated with these experiences (Cunningham, 1999; Spencer, 1999; Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, & Seaton, 2004; Stevenson, 1997). Researchers also note that employment of such attitudes and behaviors provides a protective mask, ensuring African American males a sense of control in a context they may perceive as chaotic (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Majors & Billson, 1992; Stevenson, Herrera-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002). For example, Cassidy and Stevenson (2005) infer that urban males employ bravado attitudes as a means externalizing rejection sensitivity and depression. Furthermore, Stevenson et al. (2002) denote males who are developmentally advanced but still possess youthful looking faces cope with the challenges by employing bravado attitudes.

Yet the adoption of reactive coping methods is not indicative of all urban African American males. Many urban males find successful pathways when faced with adverse experiences. They choose adaptive ways to cope such as engaging in adolescent-specific prosocial behaviors, like involvement in sports (see Stevenson, 2003). This positive coping is in contrast to negatively reacting with bravado attitudes. In turn, perhaps these young males realize a bravado attitude may be helpful in a high-risk neighborhood, but a bravado attitude could also make them vulnerable to academic challenges within a school context. Thus we focus on understanding bravado attitudes within the context of exposure to community challenges with the combination of a supportive school context.

As adolescence is a pivotal period of development characterized by self-analysis and a search for a productive future self (Erikson, 1959), adolescents identify with individuals having the characteristics they may want to emulate in the future. These individuals may be parents, relatives, "fictive" kin, or peers (Wilson, Cooke & Arrington, 1997). The influence of these entities differs however, based on students' developmental level. For example, Slaughter-Defoe and Rubin (2001) argue that earlier in life parents and peers play pivotal roles in various aspects of growth; however, by adolescence, school staffs, particularly teachers, become very influential in development. Several reasons may account for this. First, adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in the school context gathering information from pivotal sources (Irvine, 1990; Swanson et al., 2003). Second, for African American males, teachers and administrators may provide a heuristic for masculine development, possibly providing positive or negative images of maleness (Swanson et al., 2003). For the current study, we highlight the positive effect. Thus the purpose of the current research is to explore the association between negative youth experiences and bravado attitudes. We also explore how school support buffers this relation promoting positive and resilient outcomes. We use Luthar's (2006) definition of resilience, which is a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within

the context of significant adversity. When examining resilience, an important point to make is the notion of the absence of pathology, which is typically associated with adversity, is just as much a marker of resilience as significant positive outcomes associated with adversity.

As research on African American males continues to grow, researchers are more cognizant of how contextual influences affect development outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2006; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, 2006). To aid in creating a clearer picture of coping responses to environmental stressors and subsequent outcomes, Spencer's (1995, 2006) Phenomenological Variant of the Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) serves as the study's conceptual framework. PVEST provides a heuristic device for linking the net balance of risk and protective factors with experienced stressors, copings strategies, and emergent identities, that either produces productive or unproductive outcomes (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001, p. 25). Stage-specific outcomes (i.e., outcomes that are relative to a particular developmental stage, such as adolescence) may be productive, which are associated with less risk (i.e., walking away from confrontation), or unproductive, which may lead to increased exposure to risk (i.e., fighting or profanity toward an individual). Moreover, PVEST affords the opportunity to understand typical developmental trajectories of African American males across time and context. Notably one important aspect of adolescent development is to experiment with adult roles, which are often gender-specific. Within high-risk communities, the gender specific roles are associated with how one responds to his or her context (Cunningham, 1999; Spencer, Cunningham, & Swanson, 1995; Stevenson, 1997; Stevenson et al., 2002). Thus a discussion of bravado for males is needed to fully evaluate their experiences.

## **Bravado**

The ascension to adulthood can be difficult for any adolescent. However, if adolescent African American males perceive they are vulnerable because of the factors mentioned previously, many may adopt coping methods such as bravado attitudes and behaviors (Cunningham, 1993, 1999; Majors & Billson, 1992; Swanson et al., 2003; Spencer et al., 2004). These attitudes and behaviors can also be referred to as hypermasculinity. To illustrate, Harris (1995) states, "To compensate for feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and shame that result from the inability to enact traditional masculine roles, some African American youth of low-income status have redefined masculinity to emphasize toughness, sexual promiscuity, thrill seeking, and interpersonal violence in social settings (p. 73)." This display is evident in physical posturing, style of dress, speech, and demeanor (Harris, 1995) or what Majors and Billson (1992) term

“cool pose.” This exhibition of manhood can have deleterious effects on stage-specific outcomes, such as academic achievement. Often school officials fail to understand the contextual factors involved in the development of masculine attitudes in African American males. School officials view academic disengagement and disidentification, both markers of bravado, as a sign of failure, instead of a cry for help (Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Osborne, 1997, 1999). However, many adolescent males find success and cope proficiently with the stressors they face. Often this is due to the perception and experience of positive support factors (Luthar, 2006; Polite, 1994; Spencer, 2006). For some students, this support may come from a school official.

## School Support

Most professionals and lay individuals alike would argue that teachers are one of the most vital sources of support in the school context. The psychological influences they wield over their students can change lives. Teachers can take educationally underdeveloped students to greater academic heights and conversely deter students who want to achieve. Slaughter-Defoe and Rubin (2001) argue that by adolescence, teachers rather than the parents are the most influential in developing positive stage-specific aspirations, expectations, and outcomes. Students' perceptions of teachers as unsupportive may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Irvine, 1990; Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007).

The extant research documents the potential dangers of negative teacher support for African American and male students. This research notes teachers, willingly or unwillingly, lower their expectations for African American students, which results in lower support in the classroom environment (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Davis, 2003; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Diamond et al., 2006; Dweck, 1978; Ford, 1998; Ford & Harris, 1996; Garibaldi, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Slaughter-Defoe, 1997; Slaughter-Defoe & Rubin, 2001). Researchers also highlight perceptions of teacher support by African American males and how their accompanying responses to these perceptions (i.e., bravado behaviors & attitudes) play a critical role in their stage-specific outcomes, such as academic achievement and ascension to manhood (Davis, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Spencer et al., 2004; Swanson et al., 2003). In fact, Irvine (1990) posits that students' perception of teacher support is an explicit depiction of how influential teachers are on the lives of African American children. Irvine's study results highlight that teachers not only influence academic and cognitive development but also influence identity and self-concept. Irvine suggests the influence of teachers is so powerful that if perceptions of low teacher support are experienced, African American males may fail both

academically and personally. These findings liken the effects of teachers to those of parents, arguing that often from the age of 6, students are more familiar with their teachers than they are with their own fathers (Irvine, 1990; Slaughter-Defoe & Rubin, 2001).

Although there is considerable literature highlighting the ramifications of the perception of negative teacher support by African American males, there is scant literature regarding the rewards of perceiving positive support from school officials by adolescent African American males. Luthar (2006) denotes in her review of resilience that supportive relationships with teachers is highly correlated with psychological functioning and that children of color receive greater benefits from this perceived support. Thus more research is needed that examines how supportive school personnel decrease adolescence bravado attitudes and behaviors.

The goal of the research is to investigate the associations of negative youth experiences, bravado attitudes, and how the perception of school support is associated with this relationship. Framed by Spencer's PVEST model and grounded in the resilience literature. We hypothesize that students who not only perceive high negative youth experiences but also perceive high school support, will report lower levels of bravado attitudes. In addition, the lack of bravado attitudes when faced with adversity can also be viewed as resilience because the absence of pathology is just as important as positive adaptation from adversity (Luthar, 2006).

## Method

The participants are 126 African American male students between the ages of 13 and 18, ( $M = 15.65$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). Sixty-eight of the participants are from a school for science and math in a large urban and southern city. The students attended a public high school for half of the day and the math and science center the other half. The only requirement for admittance into the program was an interest in math and science. African Americans comprise 95% of the school's population. The other 58 participants are high school students who participated in a summer academy for academic and social development for African American males at a large university in a Mid-Atlantic state. Students attended their designated high schools during the school year; however, for 3 weeks during the summer they attended the academy to enhance their academic abilities and to receive preparation for matriculation at a college or university. The summer academy students took three classes: history, mathematics, and English. Students applied to the program, and student's grade point average, academic needs, leadership skills, and their expectation to matriculate at college or university

on their graduation from high school were the criteria for acceptance. Similar to the science and math participants, the academy is geared toward preparing the students for academic success beyond high school. Thus all the participants experience school in educational settings designed for school success.

## Procedure

Each group of males completed the same survey. However, the students in the science and math school were a part of a larger ongoing study that included females. Participants answered a series of questionnaires related to adolescent development. All students and their parents signed adolescent assent and parental informed consents forms, respectively. Administration of the survey was in groups of 4 to 6 students at both research sites. At the science and math school, a research team of 3 to 4 advanced graduate and undergraduate students, including at least one African American male graduate student researcher administered the survey. One person read the questions aloud while the other researchers monitored the students to ensure that there were no reading difficulties. The summer academy employed similar procedures, but in an all-male context. Students completed the entire survey within an hour.

## Measures

A modified version of the *Black Male Experience Measure* (Cunningham & Spencer, 1996) was used to measure *Negative Youth Experiences*. This modified measure had gender-neutral questions and has two subscales: *positive youth experiences* and *negative youth experiences*. The *negative youth experiences* subscale (the only subscale used in the current report) has 21 questions. Participants completed a Likert-type response of *never* (0), *almost never* (1), *sometimes* (2), *almost always* (3), or *always* (4). Past reports of this scale's alphas range from .80 to .92 and for this sample the Cronbach's alpha was .97. The self-report scale was designed to examine the participants' encounters with experiences in social or community settings. Example items included how often . . . "do sales people tend to follow you when you enter a store? Or, when you are hanging out (like in the park, playground, street corner, etc.), how often do police/security guards stop to ask you what you are doing?" Higher responses are indications of more negative youth experiences.

The *School Social Support* scale is comprised of four questions from a larger social support scale (Munsch & Blyth, 1993; Munsch & Wampler, 1993). The participants were asked to answer two questions on a 4-point Likert-type scale that indicated whether their teachers and administrators wanted success



for them, and to indicate how important this was to them (e.g., Indicate which individuals want success for your life and indicate their importance to you; (0) *not all*, (3) *a great deal*). The students also responded to two questions concerning individuals who want the best for them and how important they are, also on a 4-point Likert-type scale (e.g. Indicate those individuals that want the best for you; those that give you advice; (0) *none* to (3) *a great deal*). The scale consisted of several figures such as mother, father, and coaches. This derivation of the social support scale, using teacher and administrative support has been used previously (Cunningham, 2007) and was shown to be reliable and valid with the current sample ( $\alpha = .85$ )

Bravado attitudes are derived from the *Hypermasculine Inventory Scale* (Mosher & Sirkin 1984). The measure is a self-report inventory that assesses an individual's level of machismo. The current study uses the term bravado attitudes, as machismo is seen as positive attribute in some cultures (Cunningham, 1999). The original scale is comprised of 30 forced choice questions categorized into three subsets: violence as manly, danger is exciting, and callous sex attitudes toward women. However, because of the age of the sample, revisions were made to take out all of the harsh language in the original scale (McDermott & Spencer, 1995). Each item has two statements: one that is typical of exaggerated sex-role attitudes and one that is not. Students selected the item they agreed with more. Examples of the questions used in the scale are "I believe it natural for boys to get into fights," or "I believe that physical violence never solves an issue." The scale has been used with adolescent populations, (Cunningham, 1999; Spencer et al., 2004; Swanson et al., 2003) and was shown to be reliable and valid with the current sample ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

## Results

Two sections comprise the results. The first section reports descriptive findings, results of tests of groups of differences, and correlational analysis. The second section reports results associated with the study's hypothesis. For analysis reasons, the school support scale and negative youth experiences were recoded. The negative youth experience measure was recoded from zero to four to one to five. The school support measure was recoded from zero to three, to one to four.

Although the students attended educational settings that encouraged academic achievement, the participants also reported several negative experiences that are typical in urban environments. Fifty-five percent of the participants indicated when hanging out they were stopped by police or security. Forty-six percent indicated people locked their cars when they passed them. Fifty-two

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations School A and School B

	Range	School A ( <i>n</i> = 68)		School B ( <i>n</i> = 58)		Total ( <i>n</i> = 126)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. NYE***	(1-5)	2.98	0.83	3.61	0.98	3.26	0.95
2. Teacher Support	(1-4)	3.49	0.60	3.38	0.64	3.44	0.61
3. Bravado Attitude***	(30-60)	44.09	4.34	40.56	4.79	42.44	4.91

Note: School A—Science and Math Academy (coded 1), School B—Academy for Academic Development (Coded 2). NYE = Negative Youth Experiences  
 $p < .10$ .  $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

percent indicated they received hate stares from men outside of their race and forty-six percent indicated they received similar stares from women outside of their race. Forty-percent indicated they were always rejected employment because of their appearance. Overall, the participants were moderate in perceived negative youth experiences (range 1-5,  $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .95$ ). Independent sample  $t$  test revealed a statistically significant difference in negative youth experiences,  $t(124) = -8.21$   $p < .001$ . Males attending the summer academy reported more negative youth experiences ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .83$ ; See Table 1).

The teacher support measure consisted of 4 questions on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Averaging the scores provided a clearer perspective of participants' perceptions of their teachers' support. Findings revealed the participants perceived moderately high support from their teachers ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .61$ ; see Table 1). Sixty-eight percent of the sample indicated they perceived their teachers wanted them to be successful and felt they were important factors in their life. Seventy-five percent of the sample perceived their teachers wanted the best for them and that these persons provided good advice to them. Fifty-eight percent indicated their administrators were also important to them and wanted them to be successful and 57% indicated administrators gave good advice. The cohorts did not differ in reports of perceived school support (see Table 1).

Based on self-reports the participants were low in bravado attitudes ( $M = 42.44$ ,  $SD = 4.88$ ; see Table 1). Independent sample  $t$  test revealed a statistically significant difference between the two cohorts,  $t(124) = 3.27$ ,  $p < .001$ . Males attending the science and math academy reported higher levels of bravado attitudes ( $M = 44.05$ ,  $SD = 4.37$ ;  $M = 40.57$ ,  $SD = 4.79$ ).

Correlation analyses were run to investigate one-to-one associations between the study variables. Because of statistically significant differences between the

**Table 2.** Partial Correlations Controlling for Study Site

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Negative youth experience	—	-.00	-.06	-.07	-.08
2. School support		—	-.14	-.08	.00
3. Bravado			—	-.09	.06
4. Grade				—	-.07
5. Single parent household					—

Note:  $n = 126$ .

two groups, this aspect was controlled for in the analysis. There were no statistically significant associations found (see Table 2).

Hierarchical regression techniques were used to investigate the study's hypotheses. All variables used in the study were centered and standardized to avoid multicollinearity (Baron & Kenny, 1992). Study Site was entered in the first step as the control variable to account for the statistically significant differences in Bravado Attitudes and Negative Youth Experiences between the two groups (see Table 3). It was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.36, p < .01$ ), explaining 13% of the variance. Negative Youth Experiences and School Support were entered in the second step. The variables did not add significantly to the model. The interaction term was entered in the third step (Negative Youth Experiences  $\times$  Perceived School Support) and was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.24, p < .01$ ). Six more percent of the variance is accounted for with the addition of the interaction. As indicated in Figure 1, this interaction suggests, as reports of Negative Youth Experiences increase and perceptions of School Support increase, reports of Bravado Attitudes decrease. In addition, as perceptions of School Support decrease and reports of Negative Youth Experiences increase, reports of Bravado Attitudes also increase. Simple slope analyses examined the significance of the interaction effects. For individuals who perceived high Perceived School Support, as Negative Youth Experiences increased, they reported a statistically significant decrease in their Bravado Attitudes ( $B = -.40; p < .01$ ). For individuals who perceived low Perceived School Support, as Negative Youth Experiences increased, there was not a statistically significant increase in their Bravado Attitudes.

Because Study Site was statistically significant throughout the regression analysis, a secondary regression was conducted introducing a three-way interaction into the model (Study Site  $\times$  School Support  $\times$  Negative Youth Experiences). Although the overall model was statistically significant,  $F(4, 121) = 7.69, p < .01, R^2 = .20$ , the three-way interaction was not.

**Table 3.** 2-way Interaction (Perceived School Support × Perceived Negative Youth Experiences)

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
Step 1				.13
$F(1, 124) = 18.17, R^2 = .13^{***}$				
Study site	-.36	.09	-.36***	
Step 2				.02
$\Delta F(2, 122) = 1.37, R^2 = .15$				
Study site	-.35	.09	-.35***	
Perceived school support	-.13	.08	-.13	
NYE	-.06	.09	-.06	
Step 3				.06
$\Delta F(1, 121) = 8.43, R^2 = .20^{***}$				
Study site	-.33	.09	-.33***	
Perceived school support	-.09	.08	-.09	
NYE	-.03	.09	-.03	
NYE × Perceived School Support	-.25	.09	-.25***	

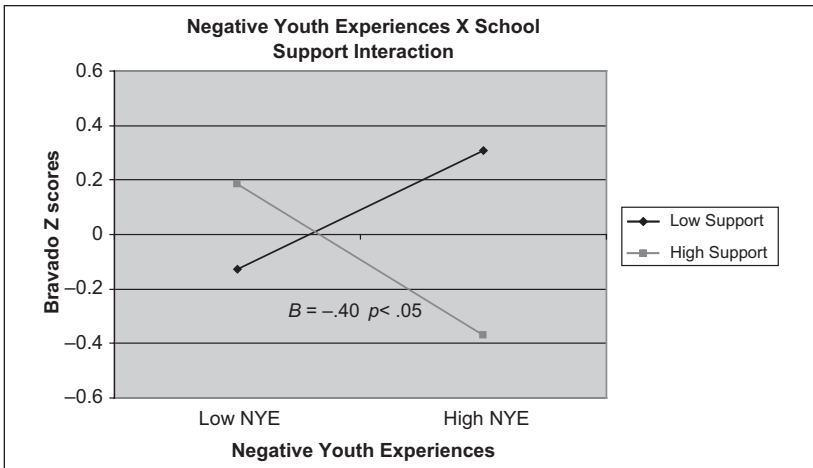
Note:  $N = 126$ .

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .  $F(1, 121) = 7.69, R^2 = .20$  \*\*\*

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the association between African American adolescent males' perceptions of the negative youth experiences, reports of bravado attitudes, and perceptions of school support. Specifically, we examined if school support buffers the relation between negative youth experiences and bravado attitudes. Although we did not find a statistically significant relation between negative youth experiences and bravado attitudes, the results do indicate that positive school support is especially important for males perceiving high negative youth experiences.

The current research adds to the extant literature providing valuable insight into how influential school personnel may affect the development of attitudes and behaviors that may be harmful to stage-specific outcomes. The study compliments previous literature regarding the perception of school support in unsupportive contexts, where African American males perceive low support from school officials (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990; Spencer, 1999; Swanson et al., 2003). As indicated in the current results, the perceived support from teachers and administrators can be very beneficial in buffering the exposure to negative youth experiences.



**Figure 1.** Two-way interaction (Perceived Negative Youth Experiences  $\times$  Perceived School Support)

As the results indicate, the participants have some negative youth experiences. One striking finding was that 40% of the sample always perceived they were rejected employment because of their appearance. Harris (1995) states, when African American males perceive they have been denied the opportunity to ascend traditional standards of masculinity they may prescribe their own. Yet the results of the study do not indicate that the perception of negative youth experiences was associated with the adoption of bravado attitudes. Overall, the participants reported low levels of bravado attitudes. By not adopting these attitudes, the males in the sample may have the opportunity to lead promising lives. Often, adoption of bravado attitudes can lead to negative stage-specific outcomes, such as poor academic performance, anger, and violence toward peers (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Stevenson, 1997; Stevenson et al., 2002). However, this was not case with the participants in the sample. Results of different analyses using the same sample revealed the males had not been suspended regularly, were engaged in school, and were performing academically higher than the national averages for African American males (Corprew, 2008). One particular explanation for reports of low levels of bravado attitudes may be the participants associations with the supportive school staff, such as teachers and administrators. Luthar (2006) suggests that perception of support can have a dynamic effort on domain specific resilience. Although faced with negative experiences, the males in the study perceived they had support mechanisms to aid in coping with their negative experiences.

Teachers and administrators can play instrumental roles in the overall development of African American males. Often, students spend more time with instructional staff than they do with their own parents (Irvine, 1990; Slaughter-Defoe & Rubin, 2001). Spencer (2006) suggests in the PVEST framework that it is the balance between the perception of challenges and supports that fosters either adaptive or maladaptive coping. Thus schools can play a tremendous role in shaping future attitudes and behaviors of adolescents and in particular African American males, especially if they understand development in context and also provide opportunities for successful growth. As stated previously, the extant literature highlights a flaw in the concomitant bond between African American males and school staff (Davis, 2003; Garibaldi, 1992; Davis & Jordan, 1994; Noguera, 2003; Polite, 1994; Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007), citing low teacher and administrator expectations, racial stereotyping on one end of the spectrum, and distrust, disengagement, and low academic performance on the other. This may leave African American males with feelings of despair, believing there is no place for solace in their lives, particularly when they perceive harsh conditions outside of the school realm. Yet the current study highlights resilient pathways. The boys in the sample perceived high social support from their school staff, principally from their teachers. More than two thirds of the sample felt their teachers were important to them and that they wanted success for them. Three fourths of the sample felt their teachers always wanted the best for them and gave them good advice. These levels of social support are contrary to reports from other studies (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990; Spencer et al., 2004, Swanson et al., 2003).

In respect to the variables associated with the study, teachers and administrators may have advised the participants on how to react to difficult situations in and out of the school setting, such as being rejected from a job or the experience of hate stares while outside of their individual communities. This is of particular importance because the literature associated with bravado attitudes suggests that adolescent African American males adopt and exhibit bravado attitudes and behaviors in contexts where they feel most vulnerable. Having a "positive voice" in the context where African American males spend a considerable amount of time can be instrumental to efficacious developmental outcomes. With the possible lack of positive role models at their disposal, African American males may explore alternative avenues to answer pertinent life questions.

Teachers and administrators, must understand the varied contexts of their students, and employ multilevel strategies that bolster both personal and academic success. Spencer (2006) notes, that the balance between everyday perceived challenges and perception of support may lead to maladaptive or adaptive

coping strategies. The results of the study indicate when African males feel they are valued and important and perceive they have the necessary social support, they may exhibit resilience in the face of adversity. To place the results of the study in the frame of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, the males of sample were able to take off their proverbial mask.

### *Policy Implications*

The current study underscores the need for school officials to understand the lived experiences of adolescent African American males and to begin to provide opportunities that build supportive relationships that may in turn curb the development of coping strategies that may hinder successful life stage outcomes. Educational statistics highlight the fact that Black males are at the head of the class in most categories of school failure, such as dropout, absenteeism, suspension, and academic achievement (Noguera, 2003). Often these poor outcomes can be attributed to low perception of support from school personnel and resulting disengagement from academia. Thus, an imperative point is to find successful measures that ensure African American males are securing positive attitudes about their masculinity and are positively engaged in school.

The understanding of African American males' contextual development and how this aspect influences the adoption of attitudes and behaviors and other life-stage specific outcomes begins with teacher and administrator training. Teacher training programs must incorporate both empirical knowledge about and actual training experiences with African American males to ensure that new teachers and administrators are prepared adequately to handle the diverse life experiences African American males bring into their schools. Research has shown that one of the greatest deterrents to the overall success and development in school for adolescent African American males is the cultural incongruity between African American males and teachers and administrators (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Brigest, 2003; Webb-Johnson, 2002). Training should also have new teachers and administrators, as well as experienced ones, evaluate their personal biases about race and culture and understand how these biases are brought to their schools and classrooms and communicated to African American males. Teachers often communicate these biases consciously or subconsciously as low support and expectations (Irvine, 1990). There is research indicating that the embracing of positive attitudes and behaviors by African American males is influenced by the perception of support and encouragement received from individuals perceived as integral and important to their lives (Spencer, 2006). Thus, by shifting the expectation paradigm from negative to positive, educators can become integral factors in the overall success of African American males.

## *Limitations and Future Research*

The current research is not without limitations. The research uses survey and cross-sectional methods, thus information taken from the participants is time stamped. Future research should use longitudinal and mixed methodologies, which allow for a broader understanding of the impact of negative experiences, perception of school supports, and the adoption of bravado attitudes over time. This is particularly important during adolescence as perception and understanding of experiences matures.

More research is also needed to examine the differences in the two cohorts. The summer academy students reported more negative youth experiences than the science and math students. However, the science and math students reported higher amounts of bravado attitudes. Several explanations may account for these differences. First, the participants in the summer academy spend a considerable amount of time discussing aspects of their daily experiences in collegial groups; thus their negative youth experiences may be more salient and their bravado attitudes lessened at the time the survey was given. Conversely, the participants at the science and math academy are in supportive, yet competitive, academic environment that may heighten their reactive coping responses. Future research should also examine these aspects as well as other contextual and personal factors such as community violence or fragile personal constructs such as self-esteem.

Although the results of the study are correlational, the study provides valuable information concerning factors that can support ideal development during adolescence for African American males. More often than not, the experiences of African American males are associated with stereotypes and negative experiences. While more information about the challenges that males face is needed, there is equally a need for more research that documents buffers to negative experiences and potential pathways to success. The current study is in this vein. With support from significant adults, tomorrow's men can find pathways towards productive stage-specific outcomes. These outcomes thwart the negative statistics associated with negative outcomes reported about many urban and African American adolescent males.

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